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ABSTRACT

Gorgias' rhetoric can be explained in three parts: his sensory-based but non-empirical epistemology; his definitions of language as inherently deceptive and of "doxa" as the only "knowledge" communicable; and his antithetical style, which reproduces the necessary negotiation of understanding in the world. Gorgias' epistemology posits a disjunction among the material world, sense perception, and language that attempts to reproduce experience but communicates only existential concepts of the mind, which are not realities. Since nothing can be said about what "is," emotional appeal is the most realistic means of affecting another individual's mental concepts. Thus, language--always expressing opinions--does possess the apparently magical power to stimulate human sensations to respond impulsively or unconsciously. This magic is achieved through the chanting rhythm and contrapuntal reasoning of Gorgias' antithetical style, which juxtaposes opposite meanings not derived from sensation, creates a felt experience of cognitive dissonance that demands decision, and strikes a balance ("kairos") in presenting a choice among contradictory positions with relative degrees of probability. In applying Gorgias' rhetoric, it might be useful to examine the notion of intersubjective validation of truth in the context of Gorgian "doxa." In contemporary pedagogy, it might also be useful to teach advanced composition students the incantatory stylistic techniques of antithesis, elaborate parallel structure, wordplay, rhythm, and rhyme, which may be used to produce a "mimetic experience" in the readers' minds. (Twenty-seven references are appended.) (MS)

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Gorgias' Rhetoric: Epistemology, Doxa, and Style

In order to assess Gorgias' rhetoric fairly, contemporary historians must first consider his arguments apart from Plato's objections, which were based on a belief in certain knowledge. By contrast, rejecting the psychologies of idealism and materialism, Gorgias believed that the human mind could neither organize nor objectify reality. After considering the subjective experience of stimuli in human awareness, he concluded that sensory experience (aisthesis) produces only personal opinion (doxa). That is, an individual's mental perceptions have no validity in themselves and cannot claim the same "reality" as the perceptions of another. Thus, Gorgias held that in human affairs, since no one can claim certain knowledge (episteme), "reality" is a matter of whatever an audience can be persuaded to believe (pistis). Given this epistemology, Gorgias' rhetoric promotes the artistic use of language to argue probable outcomes in a changing world.

In the treatise On Being, also called On the Nonexistent or On Nature (Diels and Krantz B3), Gorgias mocked Eleatic logic by proclaiming that nothing exists, nothing is apprehensible, and nothing is communicable (c65; Sprague 42). His point here was not to deny common-sense experience, but to reject the belief in absolute essences and to insist that there was no stable reality, either through the intuition of human

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reason (nous) or through the perception of sensible phenomena. According to Guthrie, Gorgias meant that "nothing . . . exists as at the same time an immutable reality and the object of human knowledge" (273). According to Enos, Gorgias "saw man . . . manufacturing ideas that lose their `existence' the instant they pass from the mind of the thinker" (49). In such a view, the human psyche is constantly subjected to a swirl of non-empirical mental sensations, a chaos of incomprehensible and discrete phenomena.

Likewise, nothing is communicable because language, like sensation, is divorced from physical reality. As Gorgias argued [handout, passage 1], in speech,

> We do not reveal existing things to our neighbors, but logos, which is something other than substances . . . . Logos arises from external things impinging on us, that is from perceptible things . . . . What is visible is comprehended by one organ [the eye], logos by another [the ear]. Logos does not, therefore, manifest the multiplicity of substances, just as they do not manifest the nature of each other. (c84-86; Sprague 46)

Here, Gorgias emphasized not only the separation between language and the perceptibles, but also described the basic disorganization of the human psyche, as well as its susceptiblity to stimuli. According to Kerferd,

> Gorgias is introducing a radical gulf between logos and the things to which it refers. Once such a gulf is appreciated we can understand quite easily the sense in which every logos involves a falsification of the things to which it has reference--it can never, according to Gorgias, succeed in reproducing in itself that reality which is irretrievably outside itself. (81)

Since human language is unable to express reality, Gorgias characterized logos as "similarly similar" (homoios homoios)--"like" or "resembling," indicating appearances only (Encomium on Helen c11; Sprague 52). While Plato objected that "opinion" (doxa), "sensibility" (aisthesis), and "mimetic experience" (mimesis) concern mere appearances--and not realities (Robinson 75, Havelock 249), Gorgias held that similitude, rather than identity, is the nature of the human world, of mental concepts, and of language.

In his Defense of Palamedes (Diels and Krantz B11a), Gorgias portrayed the contest between truth (aletheia) and opinion (doxa) as central to the trial, or to any human negotiation of differences based on probability, since, in Coulter's words, "a clear presentation of the facts of the matter . . . does not insure belief" (49). Gorgias emphasized that the problem of rhetoric is to create an "impression" of the truth through the admittedly deceptive medium of language.

Believing that language must misrepresent the on-going flux of nature (physis) in the artificial fixedness of words, Gorgias employed this deception (apate) as a rhetorical principle. According to Miller, "the claims of reason cannot be satisfied or justified . . . , [so] man is inevitably faced with contrasting logoi [explanations], each with an equal claim to his allegiance" (174). Likewise, Heidegger characterizes these contradictory reasonings (dissoi logoi) as "a multiplicity of drives and capacities . . . which struggle against one another." In the confusion of several "equivocal," "indeterminate" perspectives, the mind considers "first this appearance, then that one" (213-14). A central value of Gorgias' rhetoric is that it attempted to exploit this confusion of internal opinions, none of which are any more valid than the others. According to Untersteiner, logos "transforms a disconnected knowledge into a knowledge which creates or discloses links and relationships," overwhelming the "passivity of opinion" (125-26 n.23, 116). In effect, logos can overpower the confusion of indeterminate perspectives and "create" a version of the world--that is, the world as writers and speakers or readers and listeners represent or behold it.

Given this openness to possible meanings in the world, language assumes the autonomy of an independent art, a techne (Segal 110), in which language, treated like "substances" or "perceptibles," is exploited for its emotional stimulation of the audience. According to Gorgias' model of psychology, the

susceptibility of human sensations is the only realistic means of affecting another individual's mental concepts. In fact, he held that the psyche is so driven by impulses, emotions, and irrationality that logos has a nearly physiological power over human behavior. In the Encomium on Helen (Diels and Krantz B11) he claimed that "speech is a great power . . . , for it can even put a stop to fear, remove grief, create joy, and increase pity" (c8; Freeman 132). According to Enos, Gorgias compared speech to poetry because both can persuade "by artificially stimulating sensory reactions through words . . . , [thereby] interpreting and recreating an experience" (49). In comparing the "rational agent" of speech to a drug (pharmakon) and to magic, Gorgias again suggested that logos has a dynamic power to manipulate emotions of the psyche.

According to Gorgias' rhetoric, this manipulation may be achieved, in part, by a poetic style, characterized by rare words, compound words, and exaggerated metaphors; the pronounced rhythm of antithesis; and the "incantation" of elaborate parallel structure, wordplay, and rhyme (De Romilly 9-19). Thus, Gorgias' style is essential to a "spell-binding," anti-logical method of argument. According to Kennedy, in Gorgias' own speeches, his "fondness for antithesis is a direct reflection of his belief that truth is relative and requires the clear expression of contrasts and alternatives as the basis of choice" (65). In his Funeral Oration (Diels and Krantz B6), for example, Gorgias defined the features of heroism, according

to Enos, "by stylistically illustrating the antithetical, cowardly consequences which valiant warriors elected to reject when they died in battle" (44) [handout, passage 2].

> Often, indeed, they preferred mild reasonableness to harsh justice, often correctness of speech to exactitude of law, holding that the most divine and most generally applicable law was to say or keep silent, do or not do, the necessary thing at the necessary moment. They doubly exercised, above all, what was right, mind and body, the one in counsel, the other in action; helpers of those in undeserved adversity, chastisers of those in undeserved prosperity; bold for the common good, quick to feel for the right cause, checking with the prudence of the mind the imprudence of the body. (Freeman 130)

Through this stylistic juxtaposition of the dissoi logoi, Gorgias portrayed what Untersteiner has called "the drama of the continual clash and counterclash of extremes, into which every attempt to arrest the mobility of the physis is resolved" (160). And the historical occasion of the speech allowed Gorgias to relate this stylistic kairos to his rhetorical principle of saying or doing "the necessary thing at the necessary moment." That is, according to Miller, Gorgias showed how men in war are "caught in a moral dilemma of some consequence, their lives and honor hinged to decisions of

flight or fight" (176), and in this immediate situation of crisis, how they are drawn into action. Thus the crisis of war is an analogy for rhetorical kairos, in which the speaker is drawn into language by the force of the moment.

In the brief time remaining, I wish to relate Gorgias' rhetoric to composition pedagogy. In terms of epistemology, we can promote the Gorgian doxa as the only knowledge that is socially meaningful and negotiable through shared conventions (nomos); and promote apate as the necessary misrepresentation of instability and of relative meanings in stable terms of valuation. Furthermore, we can adopt Gorgias' relativist and subjectivist psychology as one component in a social-constructivist rhetoric that allows for indeterminacy and antithetical conclusions. Philosophically, then, Gorgias can be interpreted as quite contemporary (Engell).

In terms of language theory, Crowley suggests that both Gorgias and Derrida see logos as an interactive construction of reality in opposition to the Platonic "metaphysics of presence." In Gorgias' emphasis on "linguistic, interpreted facts" over "objective" reality, Jerry finds implications for epistemic rhetoric. Finally, in their shared belief in the metaphorical basis of language, through which "semantic innovation" can break the conventions of meaning, Grassi, Richards, and Ricoeur advance a modern, positive interpretation of Gorgias' skeptical notion that words convey only appearances

or comparisons. Applying these language theories to the advanced writing classroom, composition teachers should emphasize experimentation with metaphor, poetic expressions, and idiosyncratic constructions.

In terms of teaching Gorgian style, we can organize exercises for students to practice the "incantatory" techniques of antithesis, elaborate parallel structure, wordplay, rhythm, and rhyme, which may be used collectively to produce a "mimetic experience" in their readers' minds. Weathers and Winchester provide examples of such stylistic devices as figures, meter, and antithesis (74-78, 125), while Corbett offers examples of ellipsis, alliteration, assonance, and anaphora (429-38). Indeed, in public speeches we can also find short texts as models for stylistic analysis and imitation (Corbett 504-18). Or, we can provide examples from Gorgias' works, especially from translations that attempt to reproduce the rhythmical effects of the original Greek [handout, passage 3].

> How, then, is it fair to blame Helen who, whether by love captivated, or by word persuaded, or by violence dominated, or by divine necessity subjugated, did what she did, and is completely absolved from blame? (Van Hook 123)

In asking students to try to reproduce such effects in their own writing, we must inculcate Ohmann's view of style as "epistemic choice." This view is a compromise between

Beardley's definition--"style is nothing but meaning"--and Milic's position that different styles offer alternatives for saying the same thing. With Gorgias' antithetical style as an example, composition teachers can argue, along with Ohmann, that a writer's means of representing reality necessarily reveals an epistemology. Therefore, to experience a new way of knowing, student writers can adopt, and hopefully assimilate, the Gorgian style in order to recreate, for their readers, the tension of their own opposing thoughts, or the tension of opposing realities in the contemporary world.

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ABSTRACT

Gorgias' Rhetoric: Epistemology, Doxa, and Style

Citing the scholarship of Enos, Havelock, Kerferd, Untersteiner and others, I explain Gorgias' rhetoric in three parts: his sensory-based but non-empirical epistemology; his definitions of language as inherently deceptive and of doxa as the only "knowledge" communicable; and his antithetical style, which reproduces the necessary negotiation of understanding in the world.

Gorgias' epistemology posits a disjunction among the material world, sense perception, and language that attempts to reproduce experience but communicates only existential concepts of the mind, which are not realities. Since nothing can be said about what "is," emotional appeal is the most realistic means of affecting another individual's mental concepts. Thus, language--always expressing opinions--does possess the apparently magical power to stimulate human sensations to respond impulsively or unconsciously. This magic is achieved through the chanting rhythm and contrapuntal reasoning of Gorgias' antithetical style, which juxtaposes opposite meanings not derived from sensation, creates a felt experience of cognitive dissonance that demands decision, and strikes a balance (kairos) in presenting a choice among contradictory positions with relative degrees of probability.

In applying Gorgias' rhetoric, we might critique the notion of intersubjective validation of truth in the context of Gorgian doxa. In contemporary pedagogy, we might teach our advanced composition students the incantatory stylistic techniques of antithesis, elaborate parallel structure, wordplay, rhythm, and rhyme, which may be used to produce a "mimetic experience" in their reader's minds.

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